

# **The Neighbourhood Watch**

**by**

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## **The Neighbourhood Watch**

### **Mondays: Auasblick, Olympia, and Suiderhof (maybe Pionierspark)**

Elias roughly shakes everyone awake. For breakfast, a chorus of yawns sprinkled with stretching. There is some grumbling. Then everyone starts folding their blankets and pieces of cardboard. A can of water is passed around. Everyone cups a handful and splashes their faces. Elias goes first, then Lazarus, then Silas, and then Omagano. There is little left when it reaches Martin, the newest and youngest member of the Neighbourhood Watch. When the can is empty it is stashed away with the other valuables in a nook under the concrete abutment of the bridge. The bridge's underside is precious real estate. When it rains it remains dry and in winter it wards off some of the cold. More than once it has been defended against a rival posse. It belongs to the Neighbourhood Watch now and everyone else tends to leave it alone. The 'NW' sprayed onto the bridge's supporting columns has the same effect as musty pee at the edge of a leopard's territory. It promises bloody reprisal if any encroachment is made onto the land. The Neighbourhood Watch's hidden stash is as safe as their fierce reputation and basic street common sense permits it to be. Generally, stealing is frowned upon. Stealing is bad because it makes everything a free-for-all and then everyone has to lug their scant possessions around to protect them. More luggage means slower foraging. It also means pushing one's poverty around in broad daylight. Nobody likes a thief.

The light of day is not full-born when they set out. Elias, the oldest and the leader, sets out with his lieutenant, Lazarus. Omagano goes with them, trying to straighten the kinks in her hair, using her fingers as comb teeth. They head to town since they have the best clothes and will not stand out too much or draw the ire of the city police patrols or the judging stares of security guards. If they walk slowly enough other pedestrians will not catch their stench. On any given day they have a multitude of things to worry about and shame is one of the first things a person learns to shed on the street. But smelling bad is something they try to avoid as much as possible. People's eyes can accept a man in tattered, browned, and dirty clothing, even in a store or a church. But a smelly man is despised everywhere.

Elias knows most of the kitchen staff in the city's hotels and restaurants. They call him Soldier or Captain. Sometimes the staff leave out produce about to turn for him and his group. Some potatoes with broken skins, mangoes which dimple at the slightest pressure, or

wrinkled carrots. When they are feeling especially kind the cooks give him some smushed leftovers from the previous night in styrofoam containers—half-eaten burgers, chips drowning in sauce, salads picked clean of feta. But that is only sometimes. The kitchen staff have to squirrel away leftovers for their own families so often there is little left for them to put aside for Elias.

The real prizes are the overflowing bins behind the restaurants. In the early morning, with steam billowing around vents, with the bins laden with last night's throwaways, it is possible to get lucky and find some edible, semi-fresh morsels. By late morning, the sun turns them into rotting compost heaps. The Neighbourhood Watch knows: the early bird does not catch the worms. Elias, Lazarus and Omagano lengthen their strides to get to town in time.

Elias has a racking cough. He pulls the mucus through the back of his mouth and arcs a dollop away where it lands with a plop. The cough becomes worse each day. Sometimes there is blood in the gunk from his chest but he waves everyone's concerns away. Blood is a part of life. Blood is a part of death. He does not argue with his biology. His greying hair is unevenly cut but not so much that it draws attention. Omagano managed to do a decent job with the scissors.

Lazarus walks behind him, alert, leathery limbs toughened and blackened. At first glance his tattoos are invisible. But upon closer inspection the shoddy work of an unsteady needle and a rudimentary grasp of illustration are seen on his forearms and biceps. They look more like scars than artwork. His ferret face scans his surroundings, always on the lookout for a bin, or marks that let them know they are encroaching upon rival territory. In general, the CBD is an open supermarket for everyone. But sometimes young upstarts try to cordon off particularly fruitful blocks or alleys. Sometimes they become brazen and will beat up an old man they find rooting around in a bin. They would be foolish to try that with Lazarus. His presence in a fight drastically changes the bookies' odds.

Omagano brings up the rear, her frame thinned and stripped of fat, collarbones shining beneath her spaghetti-strap top, nipples sometimes showing their topography through the thin material, still as passably pretty as the day she joined them. Small children are the most valuable recruits. They are nimble and loyal and when you get them young enough the possibilities are endless. Women come next. Sometimes the rubbish bins the Neighbourhood

Watch visits are fenced off. Guards threaten to beat them for trespassing. Sometimes they want a bribe. Ten dollars, twenty when they know the bins have a high yield (if they have not rifled through them themselves already). When Elias has the money, he pays it. When he does not and they really need to find food Omagano goes behind a dumpster with a guard and does what needs to be done. The three of them are always on food duty.

Silas and Martin look for other essentials. Discarded blankets and mattresses, rent clothing, useable shoes, broken crates, trolleys, toothpaste tubes worth the squeeze, slivers of soap, pipes and pieces of wire, and anything that can burn. They loiter around construction sites and in shopping mall parking lots looking for something to filch. Wheelbarrows are useful, but nothing beats a trolley. When a trolley is unattended outside a store they push it out of sight quickly. If they find someone in need of a trolley they trade it for something useful. If not, they wheel it back to the bridge. So far they have three trolleys, but they are not too eager to add to their collection. Trolleys take up space and their value can embolden thieves.

Silas likes risk. He has a habit of discovering things that have had previous owners. Like cellphones.

‘Where did you get that?’ Elias will ask.

‘Discovered it,’ Silas will reply. Shrug of the shoulders, curl of the lip.

Elias constantly warns him not to be a Christopher Columbus and Lazarus threatens him, but there is nothing to be done about it. Silas steals. If he finds something worth selling then they share the proceeds. But if he gets caught stealing and is beaten or arrested then he had it coming. He is short and skinny but he screams danger to anyone who knows what to look for. A cocksure walk, an impish grin, eyes that never look away and hands that hover over a certain pocket when the talk around him gets too rough. Martin follows him around, learning the codes of the street, trying to look tough too, which is hard to do when he has to pull his baggy trousers up every couple of steps. The width of the streets, the height of the buildings and the number of people walking around still amaze him. Silas says he will get used to it all after a while.

The two groups work separately and meet up in the late afternoon. The food crew shares the lunch. Half a loaf of brown bread, some salty mashed potatoes, soft grapes, and some water. The valuables crew has a stack of newspapers, plastic piping, and two battered, floppy poorboy caps. Elias tries on one, Lazarus takes the other.

‘Auasblick tonight,’ Elias says when they finish eating. ‘Get some sleep now.’

It is too hot to be on the streets now. Night is a better and more lucrative time for the Neighbourhood Watch.

Auasblick is nice. They still know how to throw away things there. If they hit the bins early enough they can score some good things. Broken toasters, blenders, kettles, water bottles, teflon pots or pans scrubbed raw and rendered common and cheap, giant flatscreen television cardboard boxes and, maybe, some food. Omagano and Martin will push the trolley. Elias, Lazarus and Silas will scout ahead, opening bins, perusing the wares, gauging the value of the detritus of suburbia.

The only problem with Auasblick is how far it is. The further the city spreads itself out the further the foragers have to go. And Auasblick is getting fat, it is already spilling over its sides. New plots are going up for sale, tractors gnaw into steep hillsides. The bountiful weekly dustbin harvest there means more and more crews are creeping in. Soon it will be overcrowded. Like Olympia and Suiderhof. Pionierspark used to be worthwhile, but these days it is not. Too many heads peeking through curtains to find the source of disturbances, too many dogs barking, too many patrolling vehicles with angry, shouting men.

— ‘*Blerrie kaffirs. Gaan weg!*’

The earlier the Neighbourhood Watch can get to Auasblick the better. *Auasblick is die beste vullisblik.*

### **Tuesdays and Thursdays, In Days Past: Katutura, Hakahana, Goreangab, Wanaheda and Okuryangava**

Poor people only throw away garbage. And babies. Garbage is disgusting, babies are useless. That is why the Neighbourhood Watch have stopped scavenging on the other side of town.

When Elias and Lazarus were just starting out they used to flick through every bin they could find in every suburb they could reach, walking blisters onto their feet and holes into their shoes. They were indiscriminate and desperate and always hungry. Every bin was fair game. Elias had been by himself for a long time before he met Lazarus. Finding enough to eat and all of the other paraphernalia he needed to survive a day on the streets by himself was taxing. When he proposed an alliance, in the light of a burning drum under a bridge in town, Lazarus was hesitant at first. Lazarus was doing just fine by himself. To team up with an old man like Elias was not an ideal situation. But few things are as persuasive as the fangs of winter. It forced them to work together. Two people could cover more ground. Also, if they specialised—one for food, one for other essentials—they could do a lot more in a day. It made sense, and it worked for them. Anyway, Lazarus liked Elias's company. The old man was not big on small talk. Although when he had some beer or cheap brandy in him he could spin a yarn or two.

Elias was not frightened by Lazarus's prison tattoos. He had faced the gunfire of the South African Defence Force in the jungles of Angola and the rolling Casspirs and the sjamboks of the koevoets in the North. In his sleep he still heard the bombs as they dropped on Cassinga. Sometimes his slumber would be fitful, and he would whimper until Lazarus shook him awake. The two men regarded each other as equals, both outcast by their former allegiances. Lazarus never volunteered information about his prison stint. Elias never asked. Everyone brought a past to the street and the present was always hungry. The street snacked on those who regretted, those who dreamt of a tomorrow that still required today to be survived.

That was the first thing Elias told Lazarus: the street has no future, there is only today. And today you need food. Today you need shelter. Today you need to take care of today.

On garbage days the two would methodically scour every bin they could find in their old territories of Katutura, Hakahana, Goreangab, Wanaheda and Okuryangava. But poor people's bins are slim pickings, and Elias and Lazarus talk about those days learnedly, trying to pass on what they know to Martin, Silas and Omagano.

'When we started out, we weren't picky. We had to survive,' Elias says.

'When you have to survive you don't get to choose what you have to do,' Lazarus trails.

‘Everywhere, we went. Everything, we did.’

‘We had to survive, *julle ken*.’

‘But you can’t survive by being around people who are also trying to survive,’ Elias continues. ‘All you’ll get is whatever they don’t need to survive, you see?’

‘You need to go where people have enough to throw away.’

‘Where there are white people.’

Lazarus laughs a little. ‘Or black people trying to be white people.’

‘Then you can survive there.’

‘Remember when we found the baby?’ Lazarus asks. This is a common evening tale. ‘That was when we knew we had to upgrade.’

‘We are going through the bins. In neighbourhoods where we even have cousins, aunts, and uncles. In places where people might know us. But we go through them.’

‘To survive, *mos*, just to survive.’

Elias’s voice becomes grave. ‘Usually in a bin you have to be ready to find shit. Old food, used condoms, women’s things with blood on them, broken things. Those things are fine. When things don’t have a use they get thrown away, neh? But this time we are in a big bin by the side of the road. I reach for some newspapers I see so we can start a fire that night. They are wrapped around something and I lift it up. When I open it I scream and I run.’

‘I think he has found a snake the way he runs,’ Lazarus chuckles, a haw-haw sound like a saw biting into a thick piece of wood. Then he becomes quiet. ‘But I see in the newspapers the baby *met sy umbilliese koord toegedraai om sy nek. Jirre jisses!* I also ran.’

‘Dead dog? It is okay,’ Elias says. ‘Dead cat? It is okay. It is witchcraft. Cats is witchcraft.’ Omagano nods her agreement. ‘Even dead person is also okay.’ Martin’s face shows his

shock and revulsion and that makes Silas laugh. He really is new to the streets. ‘People die, *laaitie*. Or maybe the dead person thought he was smart and said something foolish and now he is not going to say anything foolish ever again. Dead person is okay. But dead baby? That is something else.’

‘Dead baby is evil,’ Lazarus says. Omagano wraps her arms underneath her breasts and rocks herself a little.

‘So,’ Elias says after a while, ‘we get smart. We move away from poor people. We find a flyer from the municipality with all of the rubbish collection dates. We make a timetable and we start watching the neighbourhoods even before there is a neighbourhood watch.’

‘On Tuesday and Thursday nights we stop going to poor people’s places because poor people have nothing left to throw away but themselves.’

### **Wednesdays, In Days Past: Khomasdal**

There are some neighbourhoods not worth fighting over. Dorado Park and Khomasdal are crowded with other starving, roving cliques. The neighbourhoods are already spoken for. All the places that break the wind have long-term tenants and all the generous churches already have their squabbling regulars. The Neighbourhood Watch never enters Khomasdal because people drink too much there. Alcohol is what took Amos. Not really. It was pride.

After a particularly good week, Elias, Lazarus and Amos decided to water their throats at one of the many bottle stores that siphon husbands away from their wives and families on Friday and Saturday nights. They shared three quarts of Zamalek to start, then a cheap whisky, then some more beer. If there were two things Amos could never hold it was his tongue and his drink. But it was his tongue that carried more consequences. It was his tongue that cursed people with swear words that could scour the grime and funk off a dirty pavement. It was his tongue that goaded people on. It was his tongue that called someone a *ma se poes*. That same tongue refused to apologise for the slight. Amos could never bring himself to back down from anything.

Then there were three things Amos could not hold. His tongue, his drink, and his guts.



The knife flashed quickly. In, out, in, out, and then slashed across.

Amos looked at his bloody hands and tottered on the spot.

Before the fall comes ...

Amos fell.

Everyone ran.

If there is one thing that is bad for everyone on the streets, friend or foe, temporarily homeless or permanently on the pavement, it is a dead body.

A dead body has to be explained. To the police. Who like their explanations to be delivered quickly. Slow explanations can be sped up by a few baton bashes in the back of a police van. By the time they throw someone in the holding cell half the crime has already been solved. The paperwork is what seems to frustrate them the most.

That is why everyone ran. Even Elias and Lazarus.

Especially Elias and Lazarus.

The first thing the police do is look for the dead body's living pals. They ask questions. Hard, booted questions. If they know someone is innocent, they kick harder. But if someone has the good sense to be guilty they ease up because nobody wants the magistrate to ask questions about cuts, bruises and bumps. Sometimes, when there has been a spate of robberies or a murder the police cannot close quickly enough, they come around and ask someone to take the fall. Jail has food and shelter and sometimes that looks like a good deal. If it is a murder that has made headlines they will offer even better conditions. A single cell, maybe more food. Maybe put you in the same block as a friend. Sometimes someone takes the offer. The streets are not for everyone.

Elias and Lazarus ran until their lungs gave out and then they continued on.

When the police finally caught up with Elias and Lazarus they were interrogated roughly at first and then they were questioned politely. Elias said polite questioning was the worst thing he had ever endured. Worse, even, than being beaten for days on end when he was caught by the boers during the insurgency years.

They were eventually let go because they refused to change their story. Yes, they were there when Amos was stabbed. They ran because they were afraid. No, they did not do it. No, they would not say that they did it. No, they did not see who did it. No, they could not identify anyone if they were shown pictures.

Could they then, to a reasonable degree—and, of course, a bruised, bleeding degree—be certain that they had not, in fact, murdered Amos for two hundred dollars and then run away after ditching the bloody knife that lay on the table in front of them? Yes, they could be.

For their reasonableness they were let go with a warning, swollen eyes, three broken ribs a pair, and limbs that took days to heal—a bargain, really, all things considered. Bones heal, cuts stop bleeding. Everything grows over or grows back, except life.

Elias and Lazarus were lucky. But they chose not to go back to Khomasdal in case the man who killed Amos thought they were out for retribution.

### **Friday And Saturday: Headquarters**

Under the bridge, behind some bushes, away from the others, Omagano lays down. First Elias takes his turn and then when he is finished Lazarus waits for Omagano to call him so he can also take his. Omagano is only for Elias and Lazarus. Silas and Martin are not allowed to touch her under any circumstances. They are told they are too young. Omagano looks at them with scorn when they make indecent proposals to her.

Instead Silas and Martin have to make the spit. Silas shows Martin how.

Martin has to pull down his dirty denims to his ankles and bring his legs together. Silas spits on his thighs and spreads the saliva between them. Then Martin has to lie on his side while Silas lies behind him thrusting into the friction until he is finished. Martin rolls over and wipes his thighs and asks Silas to do the same. Silas refuses. It is Martin's job as a new

member to make the spit. Silas had to do it when it was just Elias, Lazarus and him. Then Omagano joined and the two men claimed her. For now, it is Martin's turn to make the spit for Silas, and for Elias and for Lazarus when Omagano is going through her woman phases. Maybe if they find a younger girl to join then Martin will not have to make the spit. Or maybe Elias and Lazarus will take the younger girl and give them Omagano. She will be old. But an older woman is better than making the spit.

Fridays and Saturdays are generally spent under the bridge at Headquarters. Elias calls it that because he used to be in the Struggle. He calls broken bottles and thorns APMs. When someone has a wound that needs to be looked at he says it is time for a Tampax Tiffie and when they are low on food he says it is time for the rats. Headquarters is a safer place to be on Fridays and Saturdays because those are the days when the police drive around looking for any signs of mischief. They are the days when pride is most likely to manifest itself. Amos died on a Friday night.

Silas cannot resist leaving Headquarters though. He calls to Martin to join him but Lazarus says no. Martin cannot go. If Silas is going he must go by himself. If mischief finds him he must know no one will come to look for him.

Elias, Lazarus, Omagano and Martin sit at Headquarters and talk about what they saw in the streets that day. They talk about the fools who sit by the roadside in Klein Windhoek and Eros, hoping they can paint a room, fix a window, install a sink, or lay some tiles.

'They are too proud to be like us,' Elias says. 'But they are the ones going home hungry every day.'

'Pride is poor food,' Lazarus says.

'But sometimes they can find a job,' Martin chirps.

'They can, sometimes,' Elias answers. 'But they can find a job as often as we can find twenty thousand dollars. How many times have we found twenty thousand dollars?'

Martin's brow furrows as he thinks and that makes Lazarus laugh. 'Idiot,' he says.

‘Maybe things can get better for them,’ Martin says.

Elias and Lazarus look at him and then at each other. They sense hope, the spoor that leads the street to your hiding place. ‘Maybe is tomorrow, *laaitie*,’ Lazarus says.

‘And there is only today,’ Elias adds.

‘Today you need food. Today you need shelter. Today you need to take care of today.’

‘And tomorrow?’ Martin asks. Omagano harrumphs.

‘Every day is today,’ Elias says.

### **Sunday: Avis, Klein Windhoek and Eros**

Sundays are the best days. Eros and Klein Windhoek have the highest walls, dogs safely penned behind fences, bins lined up on the pavement, and, most importantly, people who recycle. The paper, cardboard, plastic bottles, tin cans and aluminium foil are sorted into separate plastic bags. Some people even wash the trash before they throw it away. Everything else that is of no use goes in the big green bins, which is a much more efficient way to forage. It saves time, mitigates disappointment. Those suburbs are also close to Headquarters, so the Neighbourhood Watch does not have to stray too far from their home.

The best thing about Eros is old Mrs Bezuidenhout. She sits on her front porch in the early evening with her son, waiting for the Neighbourhood Watch to come by. When she sees them wheeling their trolley down her street she calls to them. They pause by her gate as she goes into her house. They wait while she makes her slow, brittle way to the electric gate, cheeks sucking in and out on her gums, her son watching her every step. Her gate slides open a fraction and she hands them a plastic bag. Some cans of beans and peas, two or three bananas. She gave them the pair of scissors they use to cut their hair. She gave them the circle of mirror that shames their appearance on some days. In winter she collects old clothes and knits jerseys or blankets from an endless supply of wool. She hands them old books, which they burn, and rosaries they read with their fingers in the dead of night when only God and the streets listen.

The Neighbourhood Watch has three pillars: Elias's street savoir-faire, Lazarus's contained violence, and Mrs Bezuidenhout's generosity. For her, the Neighbourhood Watch would fight all of the gangs of Windhoek if they had to. Lazarus is not a believer but even he says Mrs Bezuidenhout is worth praying for, and to. When she sees them she asks them how they are. Elias replies for them. *'Ons is okay, Mevrou Bezuidenhout.'* She asks them if they need anything else. *'Niks, ons het net nodig wat jy vir ons gegee het.'*

Silas once asked Elias why he never asked for toothbrushes, or soap, or medicine, or a space in her garage where they could sleep, if she was being so generous. Elias said it was because Mrs Bezuidenhout took from them more than she gave. *'She gives and she gives and we take and we take. Soon she will not be around to give and give but we will still need to take and take. She gives something from her home to us and takes some of the street away from us. We need all of the street to survive the street. You understand now?'*

The Neighbourhood Watch starts in Avis as the sun is setting, hunting for the new apartment complexes that bring a fresh crop of bins to the interlocked pavements, shying away from joggers who avert their eyes when they see them and dog walkers who slacken their grips on leashes. Then they traverse the steep hills of Klein Windhoek where people only put out their bins at the crack of dawn to dissuade the dustbin divers from perambulating through their streets. That is how bad it has become, Lazarus says. The rich have got so rich they have started hoarding their trash. From there they scour Eros, from top to bottom, through all the streets named after mountains they will never climb, the rivers they shall never see, all the precious stones they will never hold: Everest, Atlas, and the Drakensberg; Orange, Kunene, Okavango and Kuiseb; Amethyst, Topaz and Tourmaline. They rove and roam across the neighbourhood like wildebeest following the rains, the street following them like a hungry predator.

They leave Mrs Bezuidenhout's street for last, eager for her kindness, afraid of the day when she will no longer be around to give and give, when they will still need to take and take, when there will not be enough street in them to face the street. The day before they hit Eros, the day before they visit Mrs Bezuidenhout, the Neighbourhood Watch breaks their one rule. They start thinking of the day that is not today, they say goodbye to the day that is yesterday, and worse, they start thinking of the day that is tomorrow.

